

# ALASKA'S FIREFIGHTERS

Job requires grueling training and work, pay and duties vary widely

By **ALYSSA RODRIGUES**

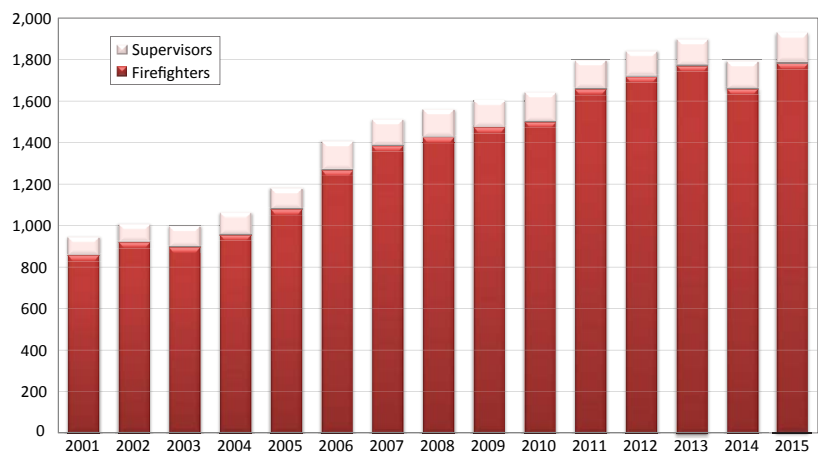
The number of firefighters in Alaska has steadily climbed in recent years and has doubled since the early 2000s. (See Exhibit 1.)

Alaska had almost 2,000<sup>1</sup> firefighters in 2015, not including federal firefighters. They included everything from community firefighters recognizable by their quintessential red trucks to those who respond to industrial accidents and wildfires. (See Exhibit 2.)

Firefighters have a reputation for being tough, and all the more so in Alaska. In addition to the typical hazards from smoke, fire, and injuries, some fight wildfires over especially large and wild swaths of land and in harsh conditions. They

<sup>1</sup>Although federal firefighters aren't included in the data in this article, they would roughly double the total of 1,959 firefighters presented here. Federal forest firefighting crews made up 56 percent of all forest firefighting crews in 2015.

## 1 Number of Firefighters Has Climbed ALASKA, 2001 TO 2015



Note: Excludes federal firefighters

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

also often face grueling tests to qualify for the job.

Many residential firefighters have to pass both physical and educational tests. For example, Anchorage municipal firefighters must complete 11 stations that

involve crawling, dragging, and climbing in eight minutes and 27 seconds while wearing full firefighting gear and carrying a 30-pound pack.

Alaska's wildland firefighters must be over 18 and have successfully completed a "pack test" at its most difficult level. The test has three levels: light, moderate, and arduous. To pass the arduous level required in Alaska, firefighters have to carry a 45-pound pack while hiking three miles in 45 minutes or less.

Even fire personnel who do not fight fires — for example, administrative personnel working in the staging area — are required to pass the pack test at the light level, which is walking one mile without a pack in 16 minutes or less.

## Wildland fires

Alaska's climate and terrain can be particularly brutal, and the fire season has been starting earlier. While cold and snow preclude wildland fires during much of the year, less snow in recent years has meant earlier fires. The first wildland fire of 2015 began April 23 as a small grass fire in the interior, and in 2016, the first fire started February 22.

Humans started approximately 46 percent of all wildland fires in 2015 while the remaining 54 percent were caused by lightning strikes. Lightning-caused fires burned approximately 5.1 million acres in 2015, whereas human-caused fires burned around 27,000 acres.

Due to limited resources, not all fires can be fully suppressed. Remote fires that pose no immediate threat

## About volunteer firefighters

A large number of Alaska's community firefighters are volunteers. Although they play a major role in fighting fires across the state, they aren't included in the employment and wage data. However, volunteer fire departments are included in the count of total statewide fire departments in Exhibit 5.

# 2

## Firefighters By Type

### ALASKA, 2015

Type	Number
Firefighters	1,772
Firefighting Supervisors	155
Fire Inspectors and Investigators	30
Forest Fire Inspectors/Prevention Specialists	2
<b>Total Number of Firefighters</b>	<b>1,959</b>

Note: Excludes federal firefighters  
 Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

to life or property are often closely watched while being allowed to burn, resulting in higher burned acreage in remote areas than those close to communities and on the outskirts of settlements, where human-caused wildfires are more common. Because these pose an immediate threat to life and property, firefighters tend to fight them aggressively as soon as they're identified.

Fighting wildland fires requires a diverse crew of workers, including administrators, pilots flying planes and dropping fire retardant, and firefighters on the ground cutting down trees and looking for hotspots.

These fire responders and fire managers are most often employed by government. (See Exhibit 3.) State government had more than 500 wildfire-related jobs at the summer peak.

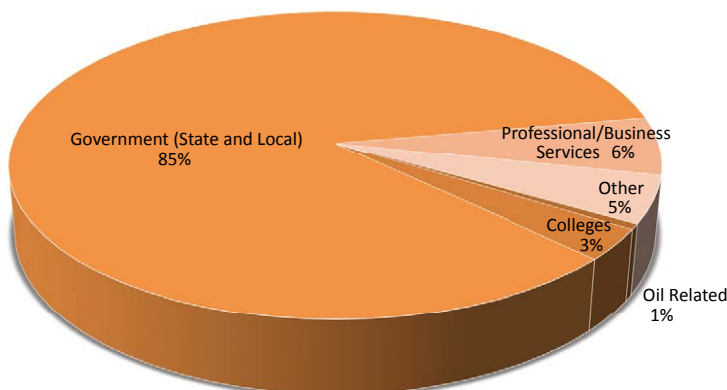
## Residential responders

Residential firefighters responding to emergency calls face a range of hazards as well. In 2014, 66 were injured on the job. Thirty-seven per-

# 3

## Most Work in Government

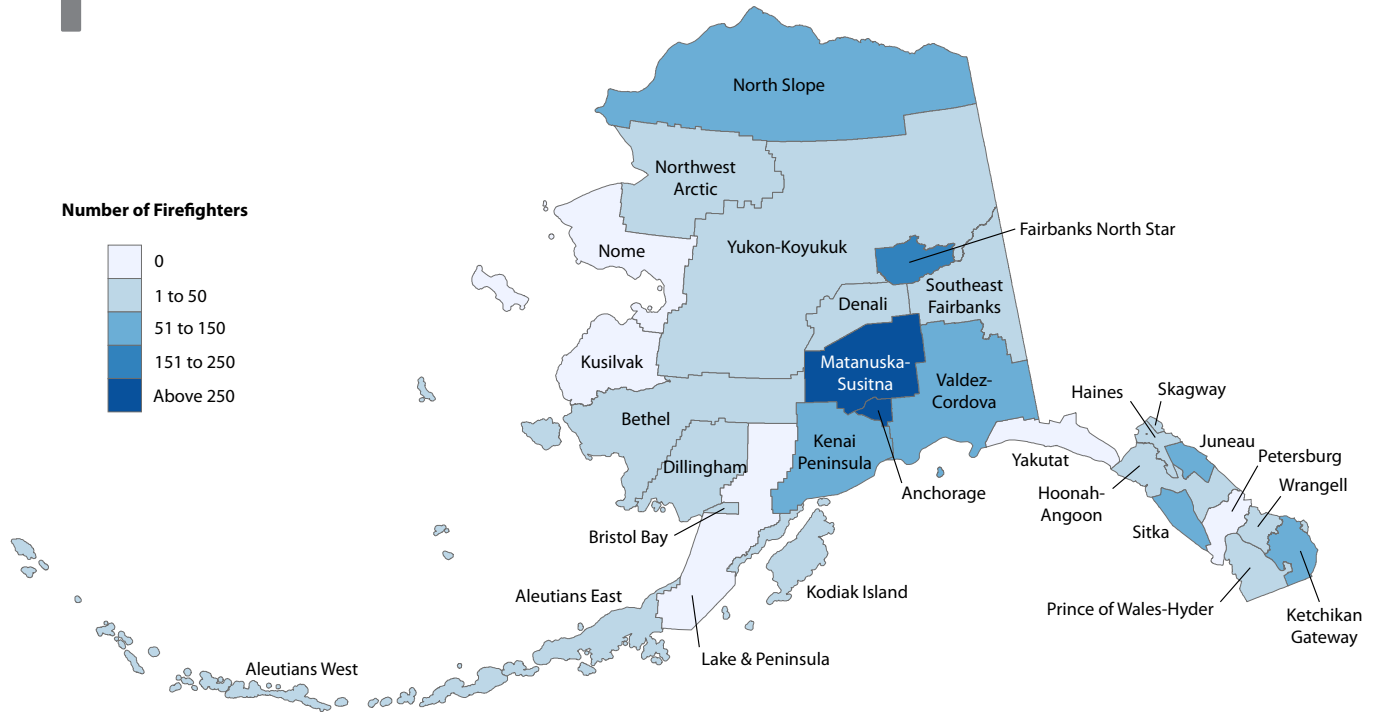
### ALASKA, 2015



Note: Excludes federal firefighters  
 Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

# 4 Heavily Clustered in Southcentral

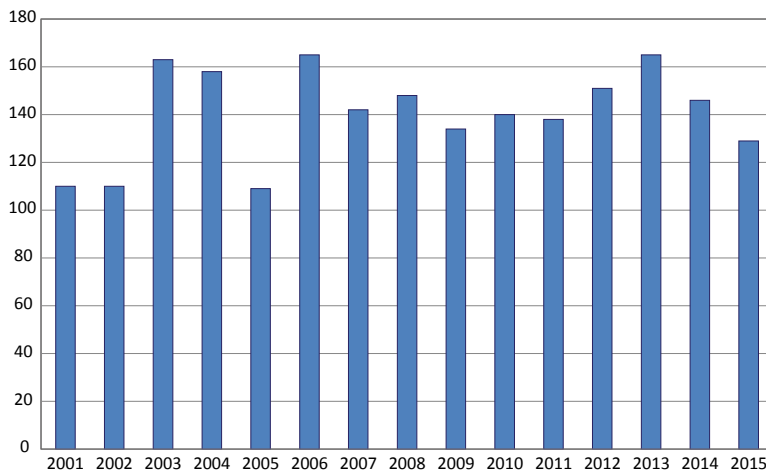
## ALASKA, 2015



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

# 5 Number of Fire Departments Fluctuates

## ALASKA, 2001 TO 2015



Note: These numbers include volunteer fire departments.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

cent of all injuries occurred while extinguishing a fire. Seventy-four percent of injuries were strains, sprains, or smoke inhalation.

But for those working in the more than 100 registered fire departments across the state, fighting fires is only part of the job. (See Exhibit 5.) In 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, fire departments responded to more than 56,000 nonfire calls, including rescue and emergency medical services, hazardous conditions, and false alarms. Of these, nearly 70 percent were rescue or emergency medical calls. At the same time, fire departments responded to 2,500 fire calls, over a quarter of which were structure fires.

## Oil industry still pays the most

While firefighters are heavily concentrated in government, they work in a handful of other industries, including oil and gas and colleges/universities. In terms of total wages, state and local governments paid out the most: more than \$65 million in 2015. The highest average wages went to those working in oil and gas at more than \$120,000, but oil and gas employed just 1 percent of all firefighters.

Among local governments, Anchorage had the highest-paid, at approximately \$90,000 per year for working an average of just over three quarters. In the lowest-paid borough, Denali, firefighters worked an average of just one quarter and earned \$3,000.

## Firefighters in population centers

Anchorage has the most firefighters in the state and Mat-Su has the second most. A combined 45 percent of all Alaska's firefighters are in one of those two areas. The Fairbanks North Star Borough has the third most. (See Exhibit 4.)

Oil-rich boroughs, such as North Slope, tend to have high numbers of firefighters as well. The Kenai Peninsula Borough, with an active oil industry and several large forest fires in recent years, had 7 percent of Alaska's firefighters.

## All ages

The median age for all firefighters was 38 in 2015, but age varies drastically by industry and geography. Nonresident firefighters were the oldest at 50, while firefighters working for colleges and universities were the youngest at 23.

Women firefighters tended to be younger than men, at 36 years old versus 39, respectively.

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